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The Defector's Tale

It was a bad week for Sergei Antonov, the Bulgarian government airline official accused of plotting to kill Pope John Paul II. In Italy, a review court denied Antonov's petition to be released from jail, ruling that the testimony of gunman Mehmet Ali Agca and other evidence justified holding him. Bulgarian credibility became even more tattered when The New York Times turned up Iordan Mantarov, a Bulgarian who defected to France. While he was working at Bulgaria's Paris Embassy in 1981, Mantarov said, a Bulgarian agent told him that the KGB believed Jimmy Carter's national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had engineered the selection of Pope John Paul II, that Moscow wanted the irksome Polish pontiff "eliminated"—and that Bulgaria had been ordered to do the job.

In Washington, one U.S. intelligence official described the Mantarov story as third-hand "hearsay." Vassili Dimitrov, Bulgaria's embassy spokesman in Rome, dismissed Mantarov as a sometime mechanic for a government farm-equipment trade firm. Even so, formal positions in communist embassies often bear little relation to real jobs—and in spite of Dimitrov's disclaimer, a small-time employee can be involved in very big-league KGB assignments. "They try to play down any person who says something," said Velitchko

Peitchev, another Bulgarian defector who is cooperating with Italy's investigation of the plot against the pope.

The contradictory statements left the plot as murky as ever. But Mantarov's account of Soviet suspicions about Brzezinski squared with the reading a U.S. diplomat in Europe gave NEWSWEEK. In a private conversation, the American diplomat recalled, a Soviet official once told him that the Kremlin believed it was "not accidental" that John Paul I, an Italian, had died after four weeks as pope—only to be succeeded by a troublesome Pole.

How much Sergei Antonov knows of all this, only he can say. Italy's investigating magistrate, Ilario Martella, is keeping the

heat on; for the better part of a day recently, Martella used defector Peitchev to confront Antonov. Peitchev is a former Bulgarian tourist official and lifelong acquaintance of the Antonov family; he claims Antonov was pushed toward intelligence work by his uncle, an ambitious, dedicated communist. "I warned him not to work for the KGB, but he did not listen to me," Peitchev said. He described his jailhouse meeting with Antonov as "a confrontation, a Ping-Pong game." Antonov "looked nervous," he added, "because he has been caught in many contradictions." Judge Martella's investigation may take the rest of the year, but Antonov appears to be headed for a trial. And in court the many contradictions may finally be sorted out.

FAY WILLEY with ANDREW NAGORSKI in Rome

Antonov: 'Ping-Pong'

